

Bullying in the Middle Schools

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In recent years, bullying has become more identified as an issue needing to be addressed in our schools. The number of reported bullying incidents is increasing; more and more students are afraid to go to school. Bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence. Because of this statistic, intervention in middle schools is especially crucial for social and academic success. In this course, Middle School Concepts, we read two books that focused on the difficulties of growing up in today's society: *Real Boys Voices* by William Pollack and *Odd Girl Out* by Rachael Simmons. Both included the perspectives and experiences of many teens as they were growing up. The books used interviews and letters from two groups: students currently in the adolescent stage and young adults who remembered recent experiences. Through my practicum experiences, my own past experience as an adolescent, and my readings and research, I was interested in learning more about bullying behaviors and what I could do as a future teacher to help both those students who are bullies and those students who are bullied.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying can be defined in many different ways. According to Pacer Center's Kids Against Bullying website "bullying is a lot of things: hitting, pushing, name calling, teasing, threatening, sending mean e-mails, taking or ruining another person's stuff, leaving someone out—and other nasty stuff. It's bullying if: someone is hurting another person on purpose and the kid who is doing it has more power."

Who Is A Bully?

Girls and boys bully in different ways. However, two common characteristics of both are that they manipulate their victim very easily, and they will typically lie and blame their victim. Bullies have a strong need to gain control of others. Gaining control can happen by

excluding victims from peers, physical actions and verbal abuse. There are four different types of bullies: physical, relational, verbal and reactive. Physical bullies cause physical harm to their victims by lashing out at them. Relational bullies rely on excluding the victims from social groups through verbal abuse. Verbal bullies use words to harm their victims; for instance by spreading rumors and talking behind the victim's back. Reactive bullies are usually those students who were first victims of bullying and who now have become bullies themselves. (*Middle School Journal*)

Differences in Boy and Girl Bullying

The most common difference between girls and boys who bully is the way they hurt others. Typically girls are very vicious and motivated to bully because of some type of jealousy. Girls are more likely to backstab and hold grudges for a very long time; they may also still pretend to 'like' their victim. In Chapter 5 of *Odd Girl Out*, the author tells of an old friend, Anne, that she had until they had a falling out in middle school. Rebecca (author) had decided that she no longer wanted to be friends with Anne and their entire 'group' then ostracized Anne. The next year, Anne didn't return to their school. The girls reunited when they were 25 years old and Simmons wrote about that reunion in her book. The reunion was emotional; Simmons hadn't thought much about it at the time but she had bullied her friend and her 'group' all joined in with her with no thought about how Anne felt. This is a common girl-bullying scenario; one girl makes a 'decision' for the group and the rest follow without thinking or caring about the consequences.

Simmons recounted many other girls' stories about their middle school bullying experiences. A common thread usually is obvious: the girl bullies lack security and thought that by hurting others they could gain some control in their life. Most girls are terrified of

being alone. (*Odd Girl Out*, p. 135) Retaliation is another method that girls use in order to be ‘successful’. “Research indicates that girls who are victimized are significantly more likely to become bullies themselves.” (*Odd Girl Out*, p. 139)

Statistics show that boys are more involved as bullies. (*Middle School Journal*) Boys are more likely to use physical bullying to feel the satisfaction that they are looking for. Most boy bullies are “insecure, isolated, and exceedingly unhappy. Many of them...are the most depressed of their peers, putting them at risk for suicide and violence toward others.” (*Real Boys Voices*, p. 109) Because boys (and girls) lack confidence during their adolescent years, when someone says something to them in a negative way, they typically snap and the bullying begins. The Boy Code is an unwritten law of how boys should act. According to this code, being a bully is a way to protect and survive; it shows that you are a man even though you might doubt it yourself. (*Real Boys Voices*, p. 109) Pollack summed up boy bullying when he said, “bullies are often not bad boys; they are sad boys.” (p. 111)

The Pacer Center Kids Against Bullying website lists three key reasons why kids bully:

- They want to have power and control over other kids. They do this by making kids feel bad in one way or another.
- They might already feel bad about themselves. Some kids who bully think the only way they can feel better about themselves is to make someone else feel worse than they do.
- They might think highly of themselves. Some kids who bully think they are better than others and that it’s okay to be mean.

Who Are The Victims?

According to the PBS Kids website, 1 in 4 students get bullied on a regular basis. No one deserves to be a victim of bullying. When bullies look for the ideal target, they look for kids who are:

- Different (because of minority, disability, size, etc.)
- Isolated with no or few friends
- Helpless
- Able to get anxious or upset easily
- Lacking confidence
- Embarrassed about something

The strange thing is that many of the bullies demonstrate these characteristics too. They pick on others so that they don't think about themselves being helpless. They also want complete control over other people. It is important to remember that anyone can be a victim.

In Chapter 8 of *Real Boys Voices*, victims of bullying wrote letters describing their experiences in middle school. These letters were, at times, hard for me to read because now as a future teacher, I do not want my students to have similar experiences. So many boys feel the pressure to be 'tough' to not show their emotion. This pressure makes adolescent life that much tougher for boys who feel they have to fit the mold of a stereotypical boy. Pollack writes, "We now know that this painful set of relentless practices sanctioned by the boy culture...falls along a continuum of boys abusing each other...that ranges from verbal taunts to physical threats to sheer violence." This is *not* a safe atmosphere for boys. How do we

expect them to learn when they are coming to school with these fears on a daily basis? Their attention is more focused on the issues associated with bullying than with what is being taught. Nothing seems safe anymore.

Parent Issues

Many parents are alarmed and concerned at the first sign that something is wrong at school. They want the best for their child and they want their child to be able to go to school without the worry of being bullied. Because students can exaggerate or get stories mixed up, it is important that parents listen to their child thoroughly before contacting the teacher or principal. Some parents react too quickly and become irrational before allowing school officials time to investigate the situation.

Through my research I found an interesting workshop available for students to learn how to better handle bullying situations. This workshop, called KIDPOWER, helps children learn how to: (KIDPOWER)

- focus on the positive
- create opportunities for learning by doing
- use matter of fact language that is not fear based
- take charge of a situation
- being and act more aware
- get help
- set clear and appropriate boundaries

The workshops are interactive and use a hands-on approach so students can really grasp the different concepts of how to better protect themselves. For adults and parents, there is a companion workshop available.

Teacher Intervention

As teachers, we need to be aware of the bullying that occurs on a daily basis in our schools. A zero tolerance policy in the classroom would maybe not eliminate but could lessen bullying situations and make students aware of the seriousness of the problem. As the teacher-student relationship develops throughout a school year, students should know that they can talk to the teacher confidentially and that their opinions will be respected. Look for curriculums that address and educate students about how to handle bullying and incorporate them into the class. Always gather all of the facts before making conclusions and never accuse students without listening to both sides of the situation. Because bullying can happen with groups of people, teachers need to facilitate conversations with their students in a way that doesn't allow them to collaborate with their peers. Actions of bullying can lead to harassment and in extreme situations considered a criminal offense. Teachers must handle these situations appropriately and fairly.

The teacher must also realize the importance of keeping parents informed of any situations that might affect their student. By being proactive with the parents, a more positive relationship can develop and the teacher may have more parental support when issues arise. However, parents will not always agree with how a situation might be resolved. Teachers need to be prepared for this scenario also. In either situation, the child's best interests are most important and hopefully both parent and teacher can work toward that

goal. It is a good suggestion to keep a journal with all phone conversations on file and keep copies of email correspondence.

School Intervention

Most schools have developed a bullying policy that includes a zero tolerance stance. However, in schools that lack the follow through discipline, bullying numbers are on the rise. As I mentioned earlier, schools can better educate their students by using resources and curriculum created to decrease bullying and increase awareness. Awareness is crucial. But with the combination of teachers, students and parents, it is possible to create a school environment of trust and respect instead of intimidation.

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